

## *The First Vote* (1867)

### *Frederick Douglass Addresses the American Equal Rights Association* (1868 and 1869)

*"Slavery is not abolished," Frederick Douglass told a group of abolitionists in 1865, "until the black man has the ballot." Black demands for suffrage affirmed traditional American principles that equated manhood and military service with citizenship and voting rights. Since the nation's founding, one's claim to have fought for the nation gave one the right to deliberate in the nation's political decision making. Douglass phrased it in this way: "To say that I am a citizen to pay taxes . . . obey laws . . . and fight the battles of the country, but in all that respects voting and representation, I am but as so much inert matter, is to insult my manhood." Many black Civil War veterans shared those sentiments. An illustration, entitled "The First Vote," for a cover of Harper's Weekly in 1867, captured that perspective. However, Douglass did not rest his arguments for black suffrage on sexual difference alone, nor did he oppose the right of women to vote. For almost two decades prior to Reconstruction, Douglass could be heard speaking out at women's rights conventions when few other men (white or black) were anywhere to be found. So there was nothing unusual about Douglass addressing the annual meeting of the American Equal Rights Association in 1868 and 1869; but at that moment, he articulated his reasons for insisting that the right to vote for black men was a more urgent demand than suffrage for white women.*

#### PROBLEMS TO CONSIDER

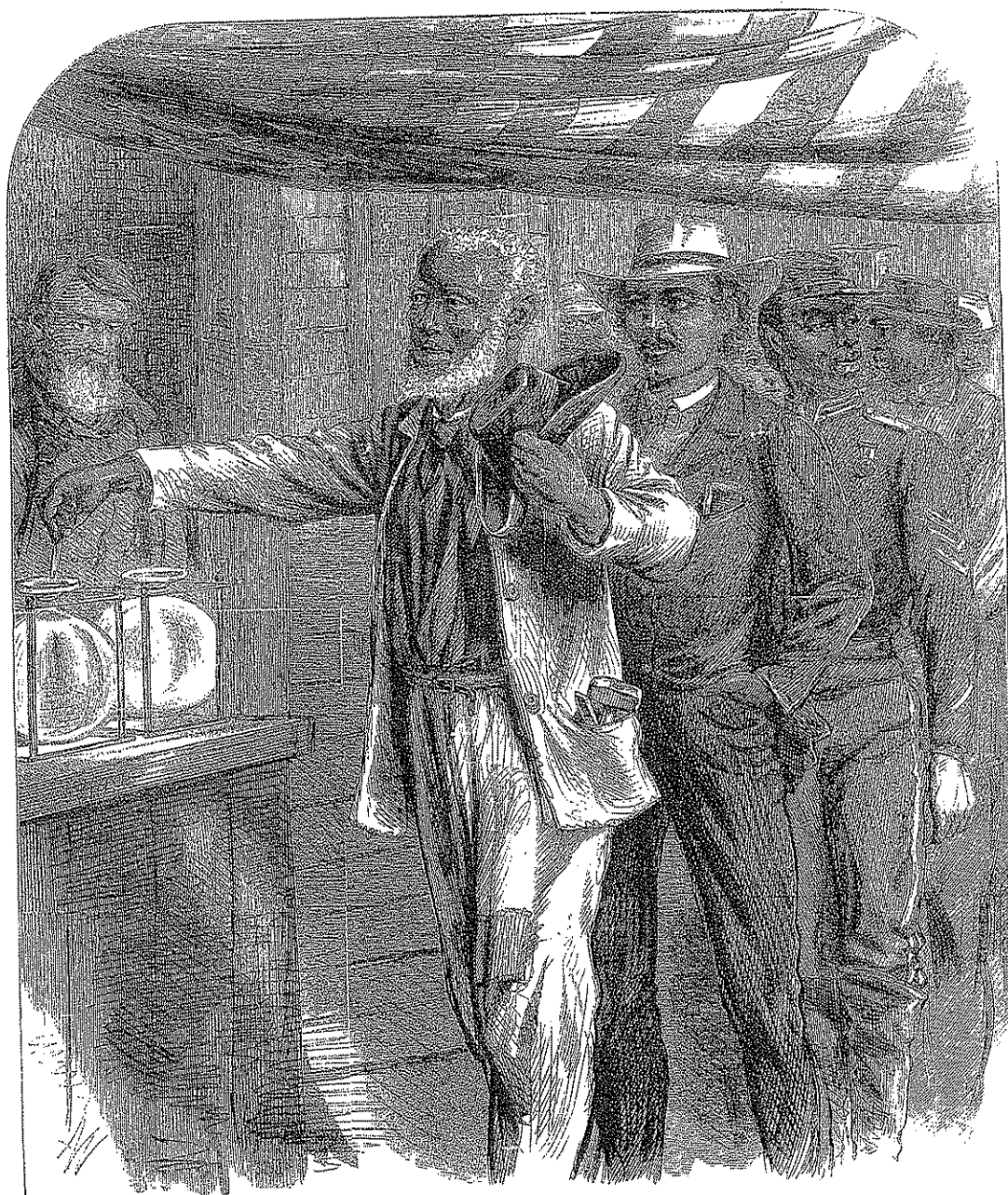
1. What do the various men in "The First Vote" illustration symbolize? And what does the image reveal about the thinking of some white northerners about black men's suffrage?
2. Explain why Frederick Douglass thought that black suffrage was more urgently needed than women's voting rights. Is his an argument about race, human rights, or class?

#### ADDRESS (1868)

The call upon me for a speech on this occasion has been unexpected, and unsought, and I have no lengthy or elaborate remarks to offer. But I must say that I know of no argument that can be adduced in favor of the right of man to suffrage which is not equally forcible, and equally applicable to woman. If it be essential to the dignity of man; if it be necessary to protect the rights of man, it must be equally essential and necessary to woman. If it have the effect to elevate a man,

to inspire within him higher ideas of duty, and of honor, it will necessarily have the same influence upon woman.

I am sorry to say that the race to which I belong have not generally taken the right ground on this question. The idea of obtaining their own rights has so occupied their minds as to exclude the thought of what justice demanded for others. Or if they thought of it, they were not ready to acknowledge the right in the case of women. But, after all, there is a great deal of human nature exhibited in this feeling. It is



"THE FIRST VOTE."—DRAWN BY A. R. WOOD.—(SEE NEXT PAGE.)

"The First Vote," *Harper's Weekly*, November 16, 1867.  
(The Granger Collection, New York.)

eminently natural and habitual in men and women too to be clamorous for their own rights while they ignore or deny the existence of the same rights in others.

What our Government now needs is more honesty, more goodness, more virtue in its coun-

cils, and for this reason I advocate the admission of the votes of the women of the land. . . . I presume that woman is about like man in these respects—that is, the instincts of the human heart in woman are substantially the same as those in man. And I see no better way than to

take in the women, in order to make our government pure. . . .

Since the termination of the war the popular sentiment is crying, "Down with the Rebellion!" and advocating the freedom of the slave, but they do not want them *quite* so free as themselves, they are willing to leave upon their limbs a few links of their chains to remind them of the rock out of which they have been hewn. There is no such thing as instantaneous emancipation; true, the links of the chain may be broken in an instant, but it will take not less than a century to obliterate all traces of the institution. Our Government must be the best and strongest in the world if it be only made consistent with genuine Republicanism, the principle of deriving its power from the consent of a people governed, taxation and representation going side by side. No man should be excluded from the Government on account of his color, no woman on account of her sex; there should be no shoulder that does not bear its burden of the Government, and no individual conscience debarred of chance to exercise its influence for good on the National councils. Then will our Government be the strongest ever seen, and be lasting until the end of the world. I do not expect that the extension of the franchise to my race and to woman is going to suddenly accomplish all this good, but it will accomplish in the end some great results. To the race to which I belong the ballot means something more than a mere abstract idea. It means the right to live and to protect itself by honest industry. You women have representatives. Your brothers, and your husbands, and your fathers vote for you, but the black wife has no husband who can vote for her. . . . The impeachment of the President [*Andrew Johnson*] will be a hopeful indication of the triumph of our right to vote. It will mean the negro's right to vote, and mean that the fair South shall no longer be governed by the Regulators and the Ku-Klux Klan, but by fair and impartial law.

*New York Daily Tribune*, May 15, 1868.

#### ADDRESS (1869)

*Mr. Douglass*:—I came here more as a listener than to speak, and I have listened with a great deal of pleasure. . . . There is no name greater than that of Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the matter of woman's rights and equal rights, but my sentiments are tinged a little against *The Revolution*. There was in the address to which I allude the employment of certain names, such as "Sambo," and the gardener, and the bootblack, and the daughters of Jefferson and Washington, and all the rest that I can not coincide with. I have asked what difference there is between the daughters of Jefferson and Washington and other daughters. (Laughter.) I must say that I do not see how any one can pretend that there is the same urgency in giving the ballot to woman as to the negro. With us, the matter is a question of life and death, at least, in fifteen States of the Union. When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the cities of New York and New Orleans; when they are dragged from their houses and hung upon lamp-posts; when their children are torn from their arms, and their brains dashed out upon the pavement; when they are objects of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own. (Great applause.)

*A voice*:—Is that not all true about black women?

*Mr. Douglass*:—Yes, yes, yes; it is true of the black woman, but not because she is a woman, but because she is black. (Applause.) Julia Ward Howe at the conclusion of her great speech delivered at the convention in Boston last year, said: "I am willing that the negro shall get the ballot before me." (Applause.) . . . I am in favor of woman's suffrage in order that we shall have all the virtue and vice confronted. . . .

*Miss Anthony*:—The old anti-slavery school say women must stand back and wait until the

negroes shall be recognized. But we say, if you will not give the whole loaf of suffrage to the entire people, give it to the most intelligent first. (Applause.) If intelligence, justice, and morality are to have precedence in the Government, let the question of woman be brought up first and that of the negro last. (Applause.) . . . When Mr. Douglass mentioned the black man first and the woman last, if he had noticed he would have seen that it was the men that clapped and not the women. There is not the woman born who desires to eat the bread of dependence, no matter whether it be from the hand of father, hus-

band, or brother. . . . (Applause.) Mr. Douglass talks about the wrongs of the negro; but with all the outrages that he to-day suffers, he would not exchange his sex and take the place of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. (Laughter and applause.)

*Mr. Douglass:*—I want to know if granting you the right of suffrage will change the nature of our sexes? (Great laughter.)

*History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols., edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al. (Rochester, N.Y.: Susan B. Anthony, 1881–1922), 2:382–83.

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### ~ White Terror and Racial Violence ~

Black voting in the South was truly revolutionary. After the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, more than 700,000 black voters were registered in ten southern states; four-fifths of them voted in the elections of 1867 and 1868. African Americans were elected to every state legislature and even constituted a majority in the South Carolina legislature. Between 1868 and 1876, southern states elected fourteen black U.S. congressmen, two U.S. senators, and six lieutenant governors. Even if these numbers did not constitute parity (keep in mind that in five states blacks actually constituted a majority of the electorate), these were extraordinary gains, especially compared with the complete denial of political rights to African Americans under slavery.

A counterrevolutionary movement emerged in the South during Reconstruction. It manifested itself as a loosely organized, but ruthlessly violent, domestic terrorist campaign. White southerners who refused to acquiesce to the new social and political order of Radical Reconstruction turned to the Ku Klux Klan and similar organizations, such as the Knights of the White Camellia or the White Brotherhood, to try to reverse the revolutionary changes in their midst.

The Ku Klux Klan was a vigilante, paramilitary force dedicated to using violence and intimidation (under the cover of night and disguise) to overturn Republican Party rule and restore white supremacy. Violence now became the new reality of politics, and the Klan emerged as the violent arm of the Democratic Party. Klansmen targeted not only blacks who voted Republican or won elections to political office but also so-called “uppity” blacks, who taught in schools, refused to accept unfair labor contracts, acquired land or livestock, or rejected the deferential behavior demanded under slavery. In Camilla, Georgia, four hundred armed whites opened fire on a black election parade, killing and wounding more than twenty. In two separate massacres, in Saint Landry Parish (1868) and Colfax (1873) in Louisiana, Klan mobs killed more than 200 and 280 blacks respectively.